

Self-Interview

Could you say a few words about you, like where you come from, what were you doing before you starting writing?

I'm from London, my parents are Greek, I studied art at university (specialising in Japanese Art), but I've always been writing – as a schoolchild I wrote comic-books with my friends. When I was older I started writing short stories, short film scripts, anything really. I always wanted to write a novel though – that was the biggest goal, but the thought was a bit daunting, then the idea for *The Axeman's Jazz* came along and seemed a perfect idea for a book so I picked that as my first novel.

The books you have written are part of a series. Please tell us about that

Dead Man's Blues is intended to be the second in a four-part series which charts the history of jazz and the Mob through the middle fifty years of the twentieth century. (*Axeman's Jazz* was the first part.) The main characters will re-appear through all the books. So the characters you met in the first book as teenagers in 1919 in New Orleans, will be much older in the last book in the 1950s/1960s. As the characters develop through the century, so too readers will see the development of jazz and the mob. In an Oulipo-inspired conceit, each of the four parts will contain a different city, decade, song, season, theme and weather. Part Three will be set in 1947 in New York in the autumn. The last part will take place in Los Angeles, either in the 50s or the 60s in the winter.

Please tell us a little bit about how you started out as a writer, and why your first novel took so long to write (7 years?)

The first novel took so long because I work full-time, and because I didn't know what I was doing – I was learning as I was writing. I spent 3 years or so writing it in my spare time. When I thought it was good enough, I sent it off to literary agents in London. I managed to interest one and they said it 'still needed work', which is a polite way of saying it wasn't good enough. So I worked on it with the agent for a couple of years, sending versions back and forth, then they sent it off to publishers to see if anyone wanted to publish it. The publisher who eventually published it said it 'still needed work'. So it took another 18 months or so working with them till it was finally published.

The second book only took 18 – 24 months, and I think that's because I learnt so much during the first book. There's a saying – 'first you learn to write, then you learn to write well, then you learn to write well fast'.

Are you a jazz fan?

Very much so, although, before I started writing the book I preferred jazz from the later eras – from the 40s through to the 70s – bebop, fusion... I wasn't really into the early jazz that's in the first two books so much. But through doing the research and listening to the music I've grown to love it. One thing I found was a barrier was that in the early recordings the technology was not good enough to record the drums properly, so the recorded songs were played without drums. It was dance music, so not having the drums in there left them lacking. When you hear modern recordings of the songs, which include the proper percussion, you really hear how much energy the early music has.

Describe your typical writing day. Any rituals you must keep?

I have a day job so there's no typical writing day. When I write on the weekend, the only ritual is to have a cup of tea or coffee by my side when I start. I try to take a break of 10 minutes every hour,

but that's more for concentration reasons rather than a ritual. I learnt early on that it's quite bad to have rituals, they become a block to being able to write, and an excuse for procrastination. I tried to teach myself to be able to write anywhere, anytime, at the drop of a hat, so that I could use any free time I might have to write. I've got quite good at it now, I can switch on a laptop and just start writing away, wherever I may be.

What sort of crime reader are you?

I'm really into historical crime fiction. For some reason all my favourite crime writers are historical, or wrote so long ago their work has become set in a past world. James Elroy is a particular favourite of mine, CJ Sansom is another, and one of my all-time favourite mystery books is An Instance of the Fingerpost which is set during the Restoration. I'm not sure why this is. I suppose there's more of a sense of escapism when the book is historical.

What do you do when you're not writing. Hobbies? Passions? Family stuff? Day job?

Writing takes up most of my free time, but when I'm not writing, I'm reading or watching films at the cinema. I used to make short films (very bad ones) with my friends, and I keep saying that when I find the time I will try and make another, hopefully better one.